DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 421 593 UD 032 445

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TITLE	Laying the Groundwork for a New Generation of Policy Research: Commentary on "Knowledge Utilization in Educational Policy and Politics." Spotlight on Student Success No. 303.
INSTITUTION	Mid-Atlantic Lab. for Student Success, Philadelphia, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-00-00
NOTE	4p.; A complete version of the article can be found in "Educational Administration Quarterly," v34 n1 p141-46 Feb 1998.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Budgeting; *Educational Policy; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Futures (of Society); Higher Education; Incentives; *Policy Formation; *Research Utilization; Retrenchment; *Scholarship; *Schools of Education; Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

This research digest reports that the field of educational policy is faced with an interrelated set of challenges for the future: producing high quality work while ensuring that paradigmatic ideas are useful for operational purposes. Scholarship in educational policy faces two kinds of institutional problems. The first is the retrenchment in the higher education sector. Education as a graduate field of study is becoming vulnerable as universities downsize. A second problem is that educational policy is a field with a high degree of permeability, one that does not often export paradigmatic ideas to the broader social science and policy community. Fostering a close connection between conceptual work and intervention design is made complicated in the educational community by institutional inertia, competing paradigms, and political influences. Nevertheless, the research community is beginning to take a more active policy role. This action has politicized the manner in which large-scale research is organized, and has put the research community under great public pressure to get involved in school reform. These two constraints lead to long term challenges that call for these renewal efforts: (1) being fiscally autonomous with university educational studies programs while maintaining programmatic connection to the liberal arts; (2) creating incentives for researchers to collaborate in an effort to link conceptual knowledge to operational concerns; and (3) earning the reputation that the educational policy field is intellectually exciting and methodologically robust. (SLD)

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Kenneth K. Wong

A Digest of Research from the Laboratory for Student Success.
Number 303

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UD032445

SS Spotlight on Student Success

A digest of research from the Laboratory for Student Success No. 303

Laying the Groundwork for a New Generation of Policy Research:

Commentary on "Knowledge Utilization in Educational Policy and Politics"

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Kenneth K. Wong

As we approach the 21st century, the field of educational policy is faced with an interrelated set of challenges—producing high-quality conceptual work while ensuring that paradigmatic ideas are useful for operational purposes. These challenges and their broader implications will be discussed in this *Spotlight*.

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FACES RETRENCHMENT

Scholarship in educational policy in this nation faces two kinds of institutional problems. First, the higher education sector is undergoing major retrenchment. Education in the form of a graduate program of study is vulnerable to campuswide restructuring as universities downsize their doctoral enrollment. Education alumni are often perceived as holding "low status" occupations and are seen as politically less connected to such traditional centers of power as law and business. Because research universities see education as largely outside the traditional liberal arts, social scientists whose allegiance lies within the discipline are likely to experience a shifting toward an individualistic interest in educational issues. Another threat to the research community comes from the emerging development of the termination of indefinite tenure to university faculty. Although it may enhance accountability, the absence of tenure may take away the most important incentive for our most capable college graduates to enroll in doctoral programs and, in turn, to pursue an academic career. Without a stable faculty with an institutional memory, the quality of doctoral training is likely to be uneven and may eventually erode.

Second, educational policy is a field with a high degree of permeability. The educational policy research community has done well by adapting theoretical frameworks developed by political scientists, sociologists, and economists, among others. However, if one conducts a critical self-assessment, one will find very few examples in which researchers in the educational policy field export paradigmatic ideas to the broader social science and policy community. How often do we publish our books with noneducation publishers? Do we try to send our articles to journals outside the educational domain? If we regard social science knowledge as cumulative, then our field must contribute its fair share toward theory advancement.

LINKING THEORY TO PRACTICE

The challenge of fostering a close connection between conceptual work and intervention design is embedded in several structural factors within the educational domain, as implied by Mitchell and Boyd (1998). First, education entails a multilayered policy system. Knowledge utilization is constrained by organizational inertia at each of the levels, ranging from the macro (i.e., societal and regime) to the micro (i.e., school organization and instructional units) levels.

Second, education is replete with competing paradigms. Mitchell and Boyd (1998) identified four types of control systems that shape the ways resources are allocated and services are provided. Knowledge generated out of one control setting, such as public production, is likely to be ignored by those engaged in the private markets. Scholarly contention can be quite intense when the media magnifies different findings and partisan position becomes polarized on the issues. For example, the current debate over school choice among political scientists has been fueled by partisan split on the issue.

Third, the political process often determines the level of legitimacy in the use of research-based knowledge. When conflicts arise, parties from opposing sides are most likely to seek out scientific evidence to further their causes. Examples include lawsuits on racial desegregation and funding equalization in dozens of states (Coleman, 1987; Wong, 1993).

Spotlight on Student Success is an occasional series of articles highlighting findings from the Laboratory for Student Success (LSS), the Mid-Atlantic Regional Educational Laboratory, that have significant implications for improving the academic success of students in the mid-Atlantic region. For information about the LSS and other LSS publications, contact the Laboratory for Student Success, 1301 Cecil B. Moore Avenue, Philadelphia, PA, 19122-6091, telephone: (800) 892-5550; e-mail: lss@vm.temple.edu. Also visit our World Wide Web site at http://www.temple.edu/LSS.

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These hindering factors notwithstanding, researchers have become more active in policy development and implementation in recent years. Several patterns of bridging the paradigm-operation gap seem to have emerged. First, non-university-based consulting organizations within the Beltway in Washington D.C. have grown to dominate survey data collection in major educational issues. For example, consulting firms are hired to evaluate major reform initiatives funded by the National Science Foundation.

Second, there is a revolving door between governmental and research sectors. The undersecretary in education, Marshall Smith, for example, was on the staff of the Office of Education before he became dean of the School of Education at Stanford.

Third, university-based researchers have formed a cross-campus, multistate think tank to develop a line of research that is often endorsed by top administrators at the state and district levels. The Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education is building a knowledge base on school reform in several urban districts as part of its contribution to the legislative debate on the reauthorization of the federal Title I program.

The research community, however, pays a price for its more active policy role. The manner in which large-scale research is organized has become more politicized. The shrinking federal pie in research funding has fostered a new kind of grantsmanship in which multicampus consortia form programmatic and political alliances to compete for resources. The infusion of millions of dollars in K- 12 education from nonprofit foundations has changed the local reform dynamics. Foundations and their university-based grantees are increasingly polarized over various reform initiatives, including charter schools, choice, and standards-based student assessment. Consequently, strategic, yet unstable, partnerships are formed and heightened contention is seen among researchers when the political and financial stakes become high. Needless to say, professional standards may inadvertently be displaced in the face of ideological challenges and financial concerns. Such a tendency may worsen in the next generation as universities rely more on part-time and non-tenure-track faculty in an era of retrenchment.

Furthermore, the research community is under a tremendous amount of public pressure to get involved in school reform. At times, research findings are used for political expediency. Even in the absence of reliable research findings, researchers are pushed to advocate for all kinds of changes on a broader scale. For example, the 1994 Improving America's Schools Act called for an expansion of Title I schoolwide projects even when there were few empirical evaluations of the programs. Findings on the positive impact of the choice program were released during the presidential campaign season and were quickly publicized as proof that vouchers will improve achievement nationwide. In other words, it is difficult for researchers to maintain their professional independence as the public and the media devote more attention to school reform.

NEXT STEPS

In light of these constraints, the long-term challenge is to sustain commitment to policy research in education, maintain academic vigor in our work, and promote a meaningful link between conceptualization and operation. What are some building blocks toward these ends? To begin this discussion, a few preliminary guiding principles in our renewal efforts are suggested.

- First, an educational studies program in a university setting needs to be fiscally autonomous from other colleges or divisions to maintain a sustained faculty commitment to educational concerns. At the same time, its faculty must be programmatically connected to the liberal arts. Faculty candidates with disciplinary training can be recruited, thereby facilitating cross-fertilization of various perspectives and methodologies.
- Second, incentives need to exist for researchers to collaborate in an effort to link conceptual knowledge to operational concerns at the classroom and student levels.
- Third, educational policy researchers must earn the reputation that the field is intellectually exciting and methodologically robust.

These and other renewal efforts will lay part of the groundwork for a new generation of active education policy research.

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A complete version of the article on which this *Spotlight on Student Success* is based can be found in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (February, 1998), pp. 141-146.

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